

SERMON FOR PENTECOST 16

ST JUDE'S, BRIGHTON

8 SEPTEMBER 2024

Have I mentioned to you that during my college days and wanting to improve my form of written expression I asked the college warden how I could do this? His answer was that I should read the books of good authors and absorb their forms of expression.

I think the same applies to improving one's understanding of scripture by reading commentaries by good biblical commentators. It can prevent one from going off road so to speak, and going beyond the accepted scholarly understanding of a text etc. That doesn't prevent one from thinking for oneself, but commentaries do provide a check on indiscriminate conclusions. Quoting from commentaries to assist in explaining the thrust of a sermon is good form I think. Acknowledging sources of course. You may not have spent much time contemplating the thrust of the Epistle of James from which our New Testament text for today comes so the following should help.

Leslie Milton in his commentary on The Epistle of James has this to say. It's a good place for us to start.

"Martin Luther branded the epistle as 'an epistle of straw' and also pronounced upon it the damning sentence, that it 'contains nothing evangelical'". "If we ask why Luther spoke so sharply about it, we have to admit that, superficially at any rate, there are reasons, perhaps good reasons, for it. For instance, in the whole epistle the name of Christ is mentioned only twice; there is no reference at all to the Cross or Resurrection or the Holy Spirit." Milton focuses on the apparent conflict between Paul and James with these words. "One of the most precious of the Apostle Paul's great evangelical affirmations: '*A man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Christ.*'" (Galatians 2.16) While "*James explicitly says 'a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.'*" (James 2.24) Hence Luther's exclamation about the epistle being an epistle of straw.

Leslie Milton comments on the purpose of the Epistle of James: “It was written for those who had no doubt that they were Christian, but needed to have their understanding of the word Christian greatly deepened and widened”

That’s what we’re engaged in this morning. Deepening and widening our understanding of what it means to describe ourselves as Christian. But today we can only spend time with the text that is our New Testament lesson.

“So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty” James 2.12

This is an instructive statement by James. St James writes from his observation of the behaviour of others and from his understanding and application of the Law of Liberty. The Law of Liberty is freedom from the old law that dictates an eye for an eye; punishment for sin without recourse. The Law of Liberty is by God’s grace delivered by Christ’s life, death, and resurrection and granted to everyone who will accept it.

But the law of liberty has its own sting in that there are responsibilities that come with it. The Law of Liberty is against sentimental and impractical religious behaviour such as worship, bible reading, sacraments.

While very important these are not for themselves but for what they lead to. These religious activities are not ends in themselves. (Milton - The Epistle of James p 67.).

James reminds Christians that The Law of Liberty requires that we *love our neighbours as we love ourselves*. And James warns that *“if you show favouritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.”* James 2.8-9. These two shine a strong light of what the word Christian means.

Now we need to think about living the Christian life we say we live in light of what the Epistle of James teaches. Otherwise, to use Milton’s comment, *“we practice religion for its own sake and not what it’s meant to lead us to do.”*

So, *“to love your neighbour as yourself”* unless put into action means that we will be judged by the requirements of the Law of Liberty; and for St James this means we remain

sinner - separated from God's law of love and therefore transgressors. This leads St James to the conclusion that *"So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."*

St James deepens and broadens our understanding of what it means to call ourselves Christian. "So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the Law of Liberty"
James 2.12

Fr John